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# **Transformative professional learning: embedding critical literacies in the classroom**

*Pauline Sangster, Kelly Stone and Charles Anderson*

## **Abstract**

This article reports on part of a wider study in which a group of teachers opted for a new model of continuing professional development (CPD) that was offered by one local authority (LA) in Scotland. In collaboration with the LA, the teachers selected the topic of critical literacy and the critical pedagogies that develop from a critical literacy approach. This CPD, which involved teachers, LA representatives and university lecturers, lasted two years and comprised a combination of sessions with all participants, focused input in participants' schools on topics of their own choosing and individual support as their critical literacy projects developed. Data were gathered from in-depth interviews with participants and the teaching programmes they produced. Analysis revealed that, despite experiencing some difficulties with declarative knowledge, participants demonstrated secure procedural knowledge in their own teaching projects which revealed clearly their understanding of the transformative nature of critical pedagogical approaches. Participants reported very high levels of satisfaction with the CPD model and its content and delivery, and found it transformative in that it shaped and centrally informed their subsequent pedagogical practices and the learning opportunities they created for their students. These findings are discussed and recommendations are made.

**Keywords:** critical literacies; critical pedagogies; transformative professional learning; professional development

## Introduction

This article reports on part of a wider study in which a group of teachers opted for a new model of continuing professional development (CPD) offered by one local authority (LA) in Scotland. Increasing dissatisfaction with more traditional models of CPD (Garet *et al.* 2001, Sugrue *et al.* 2002), with short training sessions delivered either by visiting ‘experts’ who were ‘parachuted’ in (Shawer 2010) or by school-based colleagues, led to the decision to pilot a different model of CPD. A burgeoning body of literature has highlighted key characteristics of what makes for transformative teacher learning and development and of programmes that can facilitate such learning.

However, the challenge remains of devising development programmes that incorporate these characteristics in a well-integrated, engaging fashion (Anderson and Olson 2006, Christie and Kirkwood 2006). The project reported here set out to address this challenge, taking ahead a ‘bottom-across’ approach where teachers in clusters of schools collaborated on professional learning (Coolahan 2002) in an intensive fashion over a considerable period of time. It incorporated the features that have been identified as allowing for transformative learning (Kennedy 2005, Piggot-Irvine 2006) while at the same time setting out to develop participants’ theoretical understandings (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2009).

This model involved two members of academic staff from the School of Education in one university, LA representatives and a self-selecting group of teachers who had a particular interest in the topic, who were willing to commit to the two-year project and who would themselves become trainers on this topic. The topics selected by the LA managers for the project, in collaboration with the teachers, were critical literacy and the critical pedagogies that emerge and develop from a critical literacy approach.

Appropriate content, Timperley *et al.* (2007) argue, is essential for successful

professional learning, and a key approach in the current study was not only that the participants were involved in the selection of the topic but that they also influenced content as the project progressed. The CPD project was intensive, ongoing, related directly to the needs of teachers, and allowed strong professional relationships to be built over a two-year period between all of those involved (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2009).

The research questions addressed in this article are as follows:

- (1) What are participants' views on the usefulness of this model of professional development and its impact on their pedagogical practices?
- (2) What do participants understand by the terms 'literacy' and 'critical literacy' and do they see anything distinctive or different about a critical literacy approach?
- (3) What do critical literacy practices look like in their classrooms/contexts?

The article begins with a brief account of the legislative and curricular developments in Scotland that introduced the term critical literacy, while failing to provide an accurate definition for teachers of what it entails. A review is provided of the academic literature on literacy, critical literacy and media literacy, and attention then turns to different models of teacher professional development. This is followed by an outline of the CPD programme, its theoretical framing and of participants' views of this model of CPD and its impact on their ongoing classroom practices. The final section analyses these practices and considers the extent to which it could be claimed that the impact of this CPD and its approaches has been 'transformative' (Sprinthall *et al.* 1996; Kennedy 2005) for participants' developing theoretical understandings and pedagogical approaches (Garet *et al.* 2001, Mitchell and Cubey 2003, Jones *et al.* 2006, Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2009).

## Background

In 2004 the education system in Scotland witnessed major curricular reforms known as the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government 2004). Initial guidelines for Literacy and English within this new curriculum issued in 2008 (Literacy and English cover paper for Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 3; Scottish Government 2008a) stated that ‘the draft *Experiences and Outcomes* [Scottish Government 2008b] address the important skills of critical literacy’. However, there was no further reference to, or definition of, critical literacy in this document.

As additional government information emerged it became clear that critical literacy was being constructed as critical thinking or synonymous with information literacy, effectively removing social justice aims and affirming the erroneous belief that critical literacy is another way to describe critical thinking skills in a taxonomy of cognitive abilities. Critical thinking, associated with ‘higher order skills’ within a cognitive model of improving one’s capacity to think critically (Siegel 1988, Ryan 1990, Cuypers and Haji 2006, deBono 2009) might indeed be an aspect of critical literacy, but without the explicit purpose of challenging and changing inequalities it lacks the political emphasis central to critical literacy practices (Freire 1989, hooks 1994, 2010).

Information published on the Education Scotland website<sup>1</sup> guides teachers towards definitions that are not aligned with dominant constructions in the academic literature; for instance, the section entitled ‘Information and Critical Literacy’ gives prominence to information literacy and in fact defines critical literacy as information literacy. If Scottish educators are using Education Scotland’s website as their main

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk>.

source of information about critical literacy, they might well understand it to be thinking skills, and finding and evaluating information from the Internet, not the important skills of challenge and critique and action for transformation.

## **Literature review**

### ***Literacy: the shift from a traditional to a sociocultural perspective***

Early definitions of the term 'literacy' tended to be narrow and were articulated simply as the ability to read and write. Gee (1990, p. 8) challenged such narrow definitions, noting that regarding literacy simply as 'the ability to read and write' situates it within the individual person rather than in society. Current definitions of literacy view it as imbricated in a web of social and cultural practices, rather than as a straightforward personal capacity. It can be argued that the definition of literacy that is adopted has major implications for practice; practitioners who accept and adopt a broad definition of literacy will create different learning environments for their students, environments that recognise that literacy is a term which covers a varied and complex range of social and cultural practices.

UNESCO's influential definition of literacy is:

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (UNESCO 2003 cited in Villegas-Reimers 2003, p. 11)

In Scotland, literacy is defined within the Curriculum for Excellence as:

the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and in learning, through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful. (Scottish Government, 2009)

Both definitions highlight the importance of literacy skills as a prerequisite of active citizenship and for lifelong learning. Before turning to consider how critical literacy is conceptualised in the literature, it is useful to bear in mind the ways in which recent accounts of literacy foreground such issues as active engagement; access; critique; diversity; language and power; social and cultural contexts; and different kinds of texts. These issues, as the following sections will demonstrate, are also central to definitions of critical literacy.

### ***Critical literacy***

#### *Transformation*

An important initial point to make is that the concept of critical literacy is *not* exclusively concerned with critique and deconstruction. The concept of reconstruction or redesign appeared for the first time in ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’ (The New London Group 1996), which Janks (2010) later refers to as ‘a pedagogy of reconstruction’, making it explicit that texts which can be deconstructed can also be reconstructed, or transformed. Thus, pedagogies for multi-literacies are engaged and engaging, and are not only active but *activist*; that is, teachers who use such approaches aspire to transform as well as critique.

#### *Janks’ synthesis model of critical literacy*

A key tenet in Janks’ theory of teaching literacy is helping students to understand the relationship between language and power, specifically how certain acts of communication have greater or less power in different sites. In her synthesis model of

critical literacy, Janks (2000) theorises the interdependence of four key components of critical literacy: domination, access, diversity and design. She argues that foregrounding any one component over others limits opportunities to recognise and understand how language works in powerful ways and restricts how we can challenge and subvert damaging enactments of the language/power relationship.

### *Critical literacy as a tool for social justice*

Critical literacy as transformative social practice is perhaps most commonly associated with Freire (1970), who advocated developing individuals' and communities' critical awareness to enable them to 'act upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 36). Strongly influenced by Freire's critical pedagogical theory, Shor (1992, p. 12) suggests that teachers who ask children to memorise information instead of encouraging them to challenge and critique restrict 'their potential for critical thought and action'. Freire (1970) and Shor (1992) link critical literacy with active, participatory pedagogies that they feel give students the critical tools they need, not just to navigate their way in the wider social world but also to transform it for the better. In this way, critical literacy is a tool for education for social justice and transformation.

Challenging taken-for-granted social practices, assumptions and hierarchies is a key component of critical literacy. Critiquing texts and social structures along intersections of inequality and injustice is important, but the action of reconstructing new ways of thinking and being is also a key element of critical literacy theories. Wray (2006, p. 34) makes this point succinctly: 'critical literacy is about transforming taken-for-granted social and language practices or assumptions for the good of as many people as possible'. Critical literacy in contemporary society also needs to take a broad view of what constitutes a text, with Kellner and Share noting that:



Critical media literacy offers an excellent framework to teach critical solidarity and the skills that can challenge the social construction of information and communication, from hypertext to video games. (2009, p. 381)

Close scrutiny of the literature on literacy and critical literacy, including critical media literacy, thus reveals a significant overlap in how they are defined and framed. While the transformative and social justice aims of critical literacy are perhaps less explicitly articulated in socio-cultural accounts of literacy, close reading demonstrates that they are embedded in current definitions and resulting pedagogical practices. We turn now to look at how educators may develop their theoretical knowledge and be supported in their efforts to integrate it into their daily classroom practices.

### ***Models of continuing professional development***

The guiding principles of the CPD programme described in this article were informed by a close review of the extensive literature that now exists on professional development and professional learning. One area of this literature has been concerned with identifying key characteristics of successful in-service provision, with Coolahan (2002), for example, contrasting the ‘to-down’ approach of traditional models with a ‘bottom-across’ approach where teachers in clusters of schools collaborate on professional learning. Such ‘bottom-across’ provision is characterised by: inclusion of both on-site and off-site dimensions; teachers having an increased role in setting the agenda and being actively engaged in an experiential process; training courses for trainers, which empower teachers, build their confidence and cultivate a good *esprit de corps*; and collaborative, interactional techniques rather than lectures to large groups (Coolahan 2002, p.27). In a similar vein, Adey’s (2004) model of effective in-service provision identified: value congruence; teacher ownership; coaching and peer support; access to ‘expert’ help; and clear and explicit links made between theory and practice.

Adey (2004.) notes that ongoing in-service is required if change is to be embedded as a natural part of teachers' pedagogical repertoires.

Similarly, Middlewood *et al.* (2005) highlight the concept of lifelong learning that shifts professional development away from teachers attending courses and training days. They distinguish between professional development and professional learning, and suggest that while professional development is an ongoing process of reflection and review articulated with development planning that meets corporate, departmental and individual needs, learning is a process of self-development leading to personal growth as well as development of skills and knowledge that facilitates the education of young people. Day (2004) focuses on teachers' social, emotional, intellectual and practical engagement in such a process of change. Kennedy (2005) has devised an analytical framework which proposes that professional learning opportunities can be located on a continuum where the underpinning purposes of particular models of CPD can be termed 'transmissive', 'transitional' or 'transformative'. Piggot-Irvine (2006), in a synthesis of research on teacher learning, offers criteria for effective professional development, arguing that it should be deep, collaborative, active and sustained – characteristics that can be seen to be aligned with Kennedy's transformative model of CPD.

Fraser *et al.*'s study (2007) found that the following conditions were deemed important for successful teacher development: personal (teachers' beliefs, values, attitudes, motivations), social (nurturing relationships between groups and individuals, in supportive contexts that allow enactment and risk-taking) and occupational (strong links between theory and practice, and intellectual stimulation and professional relevance) (2007, p. 8). Fraser *et al.* conclude that:

transformative professional learning suggests strong links between theory and practice ... internalisation of concepts, reflection, construction of new knowledge and its application in different situations, and an awareness of the professional and

political context. Transformative models of CPD have the capacity to support considerable professional autonomy at both individual and profession-wide levels. (2007, p. 8)

Sheerer (2000, p. 30) criticises traditional models of staff development that, ‘support theory over practice, decontextualised research over contextualised action research, and the advanced knowledge of teacher educators over school-based, applied knowledge’. She argues for a ‘shift to a collaborative design and delivery by the teacher educator ... and the practitioner’ (2000, p.30), and proposes an alternative model of professional development that has five guiding principles:

- professional development models need to be designed by and impact both teacher educators and teachers to ensure changes in educational practice;
- teachers should be viewed not only as implementers of reform, but also as investigators and problem generators;
- a re-examination of the traditionally privileged position of the university in relation to schools, and of the asymmetries in relations between academics and teachers, is called for;
- models of professional development are required that go beyond training to allow teachers to act as well-informed critics of reforms; and
- professional development must be designed in ways that deepen discussion, promote discourse communities and support innovation.

The notion of learning and knowledge creation that can be transformed into action resonates with conceptualisations of critical literacy as critique and challenge

with the aim of social change. In the following section we detail how transformative models of CPD were brought together with the transformational potential of critical literacy.

### **Theoretical framing of the critical literacy CPD programme**

The literature on critical literacy centrally informed the design of the programme, which foregrounded its social justice and transformational aims. Drawing on the literature on professional development, the guiding principles that shaped the programme were that it was ‘bottom-across’ (Coolahan 2002), ‘transformative’ (Kennedy 2005), ‘deep, collaborative, active and sustained’ (Piggot-Irvine 2006) and that it developed participants’ theoretical understandings and pedagogical practices (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2009).

It was important to sensitise and alert the participants to the changes that could be brought about by using critical pedagogies, by teaching their students to ‘read’ texts in critically literate ways – changes which could empower students and enrich their understanding of the complex texts and multimodal texts they frequently encounter in print and non-print media. Key areas addressed here included the following:

- what it means to be ‘literate’ and ‘critically literate’ (for example, Janks 2000, 2009, 2010, Street 2003, Winans 2006);
- critical engagement with literary texts, including picture-books, and multi-modal texts using an appropriate meta-language (for example, Durrant *et al.* 1990, Mellor *et al.*, 1992, Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, Pahl 2002, Kress 2007, Watson 2005);

- critical engagement with media texts, including moving images, using an appropriate metalanguage (for example, Buckingham 1993, 2003, 2011, Luke 1997, Alvermann *et al.* 1999, Bell 2009, 2011, Kellner and Share 2009);
- representation in texts (for example, McLaren *et al.* 1995, Kress and van Leeuwen 2001);
- reader response theories (for example, Fish 1990, Rosenblatt 1994, McDaniel 2006);
- critical pedagogies (for example, Lesley, 1997, 2001, Goodburn 1998, Burbules and Berk 1999, Coomber 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, Vasquez 2001, 2004a, 2004b, Janssen 2002, Luke and Freebody 2002, Poyas 2004, Misson and Morgan 2006, Coomber and Simpson 2009).

In addition, it was important to ensure that participants were familiarised with sociocultural perspectives on learning (Vygotsky 1978, Bakhtin 1981), which posit that learning and literacy development occur as a result of dialogic social interactions (Mercer 1995, 2000, Wells 2000, Gonzalez *et al.*, 2005). These dialogic social interactions help learners to bridge the gap between what they can achieve on their own and what can be achieved with support from adults or more able peers in active and sustained collaboration (Wertsch 1985, Rogoff 1990). From this socio-cultural perspective, students learn through engaging with experts in what Lave and Wenger (1996) term a 'community of practice' where both meaning and membership are negotiated. At the same time it was important that participants on the CPD programme were not presented with an over-idealised view of such communities. They were made aware of the complex interaction in communities of practice between individual agency, linguistic/semiotic tools and power relationships (Wertsch 1991, 1998).

Literacy was thus presented not as a set of individual cognitive skills, but rather as a set of literacy practices that change depending on the social situation, the context and the subject being studied (Gee 1990, Cairney 1995, Barton, *et al.* 2000, Martin-Jones and Jones 2000, Street 2003, Barton 2009). Because different school subjects, with their different genres of texts and linguistic structures, make different demands on learners (Lewis and Wray 1997), the term *text* was defined in its widest possible sense, and *reading a text* was represented as a complex transaction between the producer, the reader and the text, with the reader drawing upon linguistic and other semiotic tools (Cooper and White 2008).

### ***Structure of the critical literacy CPD programme***

The preceding paragraphs have highlighted the research and theoretical perspectives that framed the critical literacy CPD programme. An important strategy when planning the CPD sessions was to ensure that this research was made explicit to participants.

Bearing this in mind, the following overarching aims for the programme were devised:

- to review and expand participants' understanding of literacy, critical literacy and reader response theories;
- to develop a critical literacy project in the participant's school, which colleagues might wish to contribute to or use in their own practice;
- to consider one model of action research for planning, implementing, recording and evaluating this project;
- to provide opportunities for discussion with colleagues in the primary and secondary sectors;
- to provide theoretically informed insights into critical literacy/critical pedagogy practices;

- to deliver a new model of professional development that was sustainable (in contrast to the traditional one-off training session) in which the trainees become the trainers.

The training lasted for two years, and consisted of three full input days, evenly spaced during the first year, delivered by university lecturers. On the afternoon of the third day participants were required to share with the group their critical literacy projects (regardless of the stage they had reached) and receive constructively critical feedback from peers, often in the form of questions/comments. Throughout the year, on request, participants also received individualised support and input in their own schools from the university lecturers (although frequently groups of interested teachers attended), who worked with them not only to respond to particular needs but also to build steadily their skills and confidence to enable them to lead training in, and support implementation of, critical literacy. For example, some primary participants requested sessions on analysing literary texts to help them to develop an appropriate critical meta-language and increase their confidence when undertaking this kind of literary analysis; others asked for input on media analysis to understand how filmmakers create meaning and elicit a particular audience response. This model of support continued throughout year two, until the final full-day session at which completed projects were presented.

During the input days and the individual sessions the emphasis was on connecting theory to practice and the university lecturers collaboratively: presented theory; planned, devised and delivered materials that linked theory to classroom practice, in highly interactive sessions with participants; and offered an oral analytical commentary to help participants to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Throughout the two years all participants were given academic articles, books and publications to read that were appropriately targeted to develop understandings and

practice. (For details of the aims and content of the two full-day sessions in year one of the CPD programme, see Appendix 1).

### **The study**

Data were gathered once the two-year CPD programme had been completed and participants had presented the programmes that they had devised, delivered and evaluated.

### ***Participants***

All 23 educators (primary teachers, secondary teachers, teachers from special schools and a librarian) who participated in the CPD were invited to become involved, as were one of the two university lecturers involved in planning and delivering the CPD programme and the LA manager. In total, eight extended in-depth interviews were conducted with seven females and one male: two secondary teachers, three primary teachers, one secondary school librarian, the LA education officer and one university lecturer. Pseudonyms are used when reporting findings.

### ***Data gathering approaches***

Data were gathered in two ways: from detailed analysis of the materials that the school-based participants produced; and from in-depth interviews with them and the LA education officer and university lecturer. Participants were asked to provide copies of all plans, materials, resources, *PowerPoint* presentations and so forth that they had prepared for the projects they undertook in their schools and, where possible, of the work produced by their students. As the first author was one of the two lecturers involved in the design and delivery of the programme, interviews were conducted by the second author who had no direct involvement in the programme. Interviews lasted



between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Particular care was taken during the interviews to bear in mind that the response to a question will in turn shape the following question, just as the question itself shapes what the respondent says. Viewed from this perspective, interviewing can thus be seen as a process of interviewer and participant interactively co-constructing understanding (Holstein and Gubrium 2004).

### ***Data analysis***

Analysis of interviews was guided by Charmaz's (2006, p. 10) constructivist revision of grounded theory, which 'assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretative* portrayal of the studied world'. Charmaz (2009) argues that a constructivist approach is characterised by its interactive nature. Meaning is constructed by the researcher and participants 'through an interactive process of interviewing, communication, and actions in practice' (Charmaz, 2009, p. 137), which positions the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning (Mills *et al.* 2006). Each researcher worked independently before coming together to share emerging themes and to ensure inter-coder agreement.

When analysing the materials produced by participants, a combination of two types of content analysis was used: conventional content analysis, whereby coding categories were derived directly from the data; and a directed content approach (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), where theories of critical literacy approaches and pedagogies informed coding categories. A central analytical task was to determine the extent to which informants believed that the CPD programme had been 'transformative'; had been 'deep, collaborative, active and sustained'; and had developed participants' theoretical understandings and pedagogical practices. Through discussion, initial categories were

generated that centred on the key concerns of the research questions. These were modified and added to (Miles and Huberman 1994) using constant comparison, as the analysis progressed. To ensure consistency in coding, a coding frame was used to develop codes and subsets of codes. This evolved during the analysis as the definitions of categories, coding rules and categorisation of specific cases were discussed and resolved (Weber 1990). Following individual coding by each researcher employing this coding frame, decisions were checked and rechecked for reliability, and sense was made of the categories identified and the relationships between them.

## **Findings**

We start by reporting informants' views on the usefulness of the CPD, before turning to the impact it had: on their understanding of literacy/critical literacy; on their pedagogical practices; and on their schools..

### ***Overall evaluation***

Very high levels of satisfaction with the CPD programme were reported by all informants, who were very positive about both the new model of professional learning they had experienced and the content and delivery of the programme. The following extracts exemplify their views:

I mean the training was absolutely first class – it was just great. Those two [the university lecturers] are incredible ... [the lecturers] are absolutely first rate ... couldn't have hoped for a better ... it is quite simply the best training I've ever had in anything. And maybe it's just because I found it so interesting but it really was good and the people on it were very, very keen and they put a lot of work into it and it was *hard*. So if we found it hard then ... it's *tough*. (Brian)

... days of brilliant, brilliant training. (Maria)

The model was good because people had [the lecturers] at the end of an email, we saw them quite regularly, we were able to go away, try things out and come back and share with our colleagues – some that had gone well, that kind of thing. It was great to be able to share. (Paula)

There was a widely held view that the teachers learned a great deal of subject knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge from the CPD programme.

... what I found throughout it was how much I learned just about literacy, right? Which you know we've got to be jack of all trades and we haven't gone to university to do English Literature or whatever, so I learned loads and loads and I got the impression that primary teachers were getting a lot out of it. (Liz)

High-quality content and delivery over a sustained period of time; informants' high levels of interest in, and commitment to, the CPD programme and their willingness to engage and to work hard; a genuine sense that they had learned a great deal, both in terms of theory and pedagogical practices; ready and ongoing accessibility of the lecturers responsible for the delivery of the programme; informants' increasing willingness to share successes and challenges with other participants; a feeling that they were part of something that was worthwhile, different and innovative that gave them a sense of belonging; a willingness to share resources and materials; and the opportunity to establish and sustain very positive and trusting professional relationships with colleagues from other schools and different sectors of education all characterised informants' responses to questions concerning their overall satisfaction with the CPD programme.

### ***Impact on their understanding of literacy/critical literacy***

While the participants may have found this approach to development engaging, the question remains of the degree to which understandings and practices had changed.

Looking first at understanding, several informants spoke eloquently about their critical pedagogical practices, using an appropriate meta-language. Others gave a less developed account but still demonstrated a sound grasp of key critical literacy concepts.

A more differentiated picture was evident in relation to definitions of literacy. Three informants offered traditional definitions of literacy as reading, and of being literate as being able to tread texts independently. Maria stated: 'I think my definition of literacy to me is the kind of nuts and bolts of reading.' She later ascribed literal understanding and interpretation of texts to being literate, and identified being critically literate as seeing the underlying or hidden message. Thus, by the end of the interview she concluded that one *can* be critically literate without having a foundation of technical skills. Like Maria, Brian believed that independent reading skills are a necessary foundation for critical literacy: he appeared to understand being literate as the ability to read *independently*, and being critically literate as the ability to *read in order to analyse texts critically*. Brian described how students who were not 'strong readers', who could not necessarily read a text independently, could still be distinctly critical; his implicit meaning was thus that students *can* be critically literate without first being literate, if that is defined as being able to read independently.

In contrast, other informants described literacy and being literate, as well as critical literacy and being critically literate, in terms which reflect Freire and Macedo's (1987) 'reading the world as well as the word'. If *the word* means reading texts, and *the world* represents a wider conceptualisation of society, politics, culture and interpersonal relationships, the data showed that these informants theorised about how students are positioned *within* the world, and *by* the world and the word.

It was clear that Valerie's concerns about her students' lack of self-awareness, their willingness instead to create 'little soap operas around themselves', were linked

with her anxieties about her own interactions with them, what might in dominant educational discourse be described as ‘behaviour management’. She observed that young people in her school view teachers much as they view the police – that there was very little trust; and she shared her view that the students would not respect and therefore ‘open up’ to or engage in deep discussions with a teacher who could not control a class. The two dominant themes in Valerie’s discussion can thus be interpreted as *awareness* and *power*. Awareness and power are important themes in critical literacy, specifically awareness of how our positioning in language and social practices impacts on our understandings of social justice, which can lead to action and transformation.

When discussing interactions with peers Anne, like Valerie and Diane, equated awareness of self and others with being literate. Communicating with the world in order to *change* and *improve* the world is at the heart of critical literacy (Freire, 1970, Janks, 2010), but if the students that educators teach refuse to communicate with the world for the purposes of active engagement and change, educators might feel powerless to enact critical pedagogies for social justice.

### ***Critical literacy as a natural acuity***

One of the key findings is that these participants represented critical literacy as a natural ability that young students have. Brian, for example, discussed students’ innate critical capacity; and Diane shared a similar view about critical literacy as a natural capacity that students have and which should be nurtured. Young students, in Anne’s opinion, need *access* to pedagogical approaches that help them learn how to question, to ‘guide their thinking’ rather than consider them non-compliant. She suggested that if we do not provide students with access to pedagogies that promote challenge and critique, the possibility exists that we effectively silence them, such that by the time they reach

adolescence they have internalised the belief that to question is to be badly behaved. This shifts questioning from a 'higher order thinking skill' (as it is described on the Education Scotland website), to a capacity that is present in all of us from the earliest stages of development, and is in fact a vital lifelong skill. It recalls Gee's (2000, p. 62) distinction between the cognitive notion of higher order thinking skills and the capacity to think 'critiquely', which he describes as the ability 'to understand and critique systems of power and injustice'.

Anne described the potential for critical literacy practices in nursery classes, saying that young students are, 'open to seeing so much more and if you can prompt them and take them in a certain direction then they can see things and take you along the road as well, I believe'. Here, she was also depicting a natural capacity young students have to question, which requires nurturing in terms of equipping them with the appropriate tools, such as the *meta-language* to question, but which would enable educators to learn from the students. This is very much a philosophy of educators and students as co-constructors of knowledge (Shor, 1992), learning from each other.

Anne articulated the key distinction between dominant conceptualisations of literacy and critical literacy that were identified in the literature review, the *action* or *transformation* aspect, in terms of guiding students towards 'challenging the world' and imagining how it might be made better. When discussing the most appropriate age/stage at which students should be introduced to critical literacy practices, Maria argued that young people have encountered so much information in so many forms that, without critical awareness which enables them to challenge and critique what they are seeing and reading, they will have been negatively influenced by these uncritical interactions with texts.

### ***Impact on informants' pedagogical practices***

It was particularly encouraging that every informant demonstrated secure procedural knowledge and understandings of critical literacy theories and practices (Green and Hecht 1992) in the teaching programmes they devised, implemented and evaluated. This was evident across all ages and stages from Primary One (age four/five) to Secondary Three/Four (age 14/15). The following (necessarily brief) accounts of informants' teaching programmes exemplify how critical literacy practices were taken ahead in the classroom.

#### *Critical literacy practice 1 - using picture-ebooks to teach and develop critical questioning skills*

Paula spoke about her own critical literacy practices with her Primary Six (age nine/10) class, specifically the use of Anthony Browne's picture-book *Voices in the Park* (Browne 1999) to teach students the language of critical questioning. She described how the students engaged with, and responded to, the text. The issue of *access* to critical readings of language and images through picture-books is one that is highly pertinent when teaching students who have difficulties reading texts independently. The suggested activities for each of the four voices or four narrative points of view in the picture-book covered all stages, Primary One through to Primary Seven. There was also evidence of challenge and critique of representations of *family* in her questions.

Paula was able to move beyond the initial resistance to a picture-book, and found that the sophisticated imagery, symbolism, illustrations and potential for critical questioning engaged the students. This example suggests that using picture-books is an important way of providing *access* to texts and transferring *power* to students who do not conform to dominant constructions of 'being literate', a key aspect of critical

literacy practices for social justice. Paula's enactment thus demonstrated highly-developed understandings of critical literacy theory and practice.

#### *Critical literacy practice 2 – adverts: critical media literacy*

Several informants discussed the use of adverts during the initial critical literacy training, and some mentioned how they, or their colleagues, had subsequently used critical media literacy. Maria described the juxtaposition of language and images in advertising to teach the concepts of *bias* and *manipulation* in her secondary school, explaining that the critical literacy training was a direct influence on this practice. She constructed two contrasting *PowerPoint* presentations, each using language that explicitly demonstrated contrasting perspectives. The two other participants from the secondary sector also discussed the use of adverts or critical media literacy in their settings.

Valerie stated that the use of adverts in the training gave her confidence that she *had* been using a critical literacy approach, as she explained that she was discussing the processes of interpretation of images and words with her students. Liz used critical approaches to look at adverts to prevent or protect her students from being 'hoodwinked'. One additional purpose of Liz's use of adverts was to prompt discussions about how to question, or use appropriate language to challenge or critique practices which the young people might perceive as unfair or unjust in the wider social world. The *partial* nature of the language used in advertising, or the gaps and silences in those texts, is an important aspect of critical literacy. Throughout the project, Paula demonstrated an acute awareness of the power of gaps and silences, in the case of adverts, to persuade or manipulate.

Brian observed that the students can be more skilled than teachers, who were described as scratching their heads while their students could read, analyse and



interpret, and evaluate messages in adverts. This addresses the theme of *access*, in that students were identified as being able to access meaning and messages in media texts more skilfully than adults, and thus power shifts to students in the co-construction of knowledge (Bell, 2011). Critical media literacy can also be seen as an important way to build a repertoire of *understanding performances* (Perkins, 1998) in which educators as facilitators provide opportunities for students to develop and perform their understandings of critical literacy (Kellner and Share 2009).

*Critical literacy practice 3 - using comic books and films about superheroes to develop critical capacity*

Brian gave a presentation during the critical literacy training about his work on superheroes, using comic books and films. His presentation revealed that he focused on the following key areas in his superheroes approach:

- Heroes, villains and those in between.
- Pre-assessment.
- Daredevil and Punisher.
- Retellings and point of view.
- Morals.
- Class debate.

The first category shows an awareness of binary opposites, common to comic books and superhero films, as well as a critical approach in terms of conceptualising those characters who do not fit the genre stereotype or pattern, 'those in between'. Using Daredevil and Punisher as the focus, Brian extended the students' knowledge and understanding of the story by engaging them in retellings and exploring different points of view. A key element of comic book narratives and superhero films is the moral,

which is also an important aspect of critical discussions about texts (Morrell 2008, Kellner and Share 2009). The class debate in Brian's class involved analysis, critique, and challenge – of one's own views and assumptions as well as others' – and was an engaging, participatory activity. Brian's approach clearly demonstrates how well he enacted critical pedagogies through the use of comic books and superhero films.

*Access* for students who might have difficulty reading print texts independently is an important factor when analysing Brian's approach. *Power* is a central theme in comic books and films about superheroes, from physical, sometimes supernatural, power to emotional or psychological power, which enables characters to overcome problems or crises, and is often constructed along intersections of dominance and otherness. Readings and discussions about sameness and difference, binary categories and stereotypes are thus enabled. Reconstruction, a key distinction of a critical literacy approach, was an important feature of Brian's critical literacy practices.

#### *Critical literacy practice 4 – fairy tales: a whole school critical literacy approach*

Several participants discussed the use of fairy tales in a cross-curricular, whole-school critical literacy approach in one small primary school. The project began with an exploration of points of view and the question of whether the story could be told from another perspective. Using *Little Red Riding Hood*, 'they got lots of rehabilitation of the wolf tales'. Diane also explained that using picture-books worked very well in terms of putting theory into practice. For example, one class focused on the issue of gender, asking: Could Little Red Riding Hood rescue herself? If it wasn't the woodcutter then who could have rescued her? Is this mother not a bit neglectful? Diane explained that the school staff was guided in using a key questions approach

within an overarching Line of Enquiry to help them put theory into practice.

Opportunities for shared experiences were created around the story *Little Red Riding Hood*, by going into the woods nearby and taking on the roles of Little Red Riding Hood and the woodcutter and re-enacting the story to help them answer the key questions. The focus was on the listening and talking aspects of literacy; however, Diane explained that school staff was ‘surprised by the quality of writing they got in Primary 3 and 4 as a result of doing that ... the writing was an unexpected bonus’. Similarly, Anne spoke about the quality of writing in Primary One, which challenged the dominant construction of the wolf as the antagonist: ‘They were writing to the wolf, you know, and they were appreciating that he’s had a bum deal basically.’

Maria argued that a critical literacy approach should be used from the early years of education to foster students’ natural critical questioning capacities, and believed that critical literacy can be made fun when it is enacted with young students (Vasquez, 2004a, 2004b, 2009, 2010). Speaking about the whole-school approach, she said: ‘But I do remember that *Little Red Riding Hood* was an excellent example of critical literacy but *fun*.’

### ***Impact on the schools they worked in***

Each of the informants talked about returning to their schools and sharing their developing understandings of critical pedagogies, and presenting at local conferences. For example, Anne discussed how, as she supported colleagues in enacting critical literacy, she advised them to use familiar adverts as ways to ‘hook’ students in or to engage them in critical discussions. She described the unknown, unfamiliar directions in which critical pedagogies can lead educators, thus providing access to a different terrain:

It's exciting and it's a different way of teaching and you don't quite know which way it's going to go, but that's the exciting bit about it.

Brian noted that he had helped his colleague, a Primary Seven teacher, construct a unit of critical literacy as part of the Health and Wellbeing curriculum, using materials which he was given during the critical literacy training. He described the work that was done as 'reading' adverts and then discussing them, explaining that his colleague:

... absolutely loved it and she said – as have I found – that the kids are actually very good at it. If you can explain it to them in a clear way they can do it.

Several informants believed that it was difficult for them to have a significant impact on their colleagues' practices, or on the school's overall philosophy and direction, because they were not 'promoted' teachers and therefore had limited influence. Paula noted that one of the CPD participants had been a head teacher who was very committed to developing critical literacy practices and pedagogies in her school, and was therefore well placed to pursue this agenda. Paula also felt that the size of the school made a difference, with smaller schools being more likely to adopt whole-school approaches:

... I think that makes a huge difference. The person who's driving the school forward has done the course. That's what made it slightly more difficult for me, I'm just a class teacher. Now and again they'll say, 'Will you do something?' And that's fine and I can do that and I don't mind doing that. ... I think in a wee [small] school as well, it's easier to say, 'Come on let's all do [it]' and make it the main focus.

## **Discussion**

The key outcome of this CPD programme is that the teaching programmes all informants produced, delivered and evaluated demonstrate not only that they had

learned a great deal about the theories of critical literacy and critical pedagogies, but that they were able to take these ahead in their own teaching. In other words, the procedural knowledge of how to enact critical literacy and its associated pedagogies appeared to be securely in place. While some participants were able to provide a more fully developed account of critical literacy than others, sound understandings of central features of critical literacy were evident across the board. The picture in relation to declarative knowledge about literacy was a more differentiated one. Consonant with the recent definitions of literacy in the literature, there was a clear *conjunction* in the way that some participants defined the meaning of literacy and of critical literacy. However, other participants deployed traditional conceptions of literacy to contrast it with critical literacy. One possible implication here is that more attention might have been given to encouraging participants to reflect on and refine their definitions of literacy. This set of findings concerning declarative knowledge of literacy and critical literacy would also seem to point up that care should be taken in avoiding any blanket categorisations of teachers' knowledge about literacy.

In the following paragraphs we revisit the model that underpinned this programme, noting how it set out to embody in an integrated fashion features that have been identified in the literature as making for successful professional learning. First, however, it is important to note what the participants themselves brought to this exercise in professional learning, rather than facilely attributing success in embedding critical literacy in the classroom to the design of the CPD programme. It is important also to exercise caution when analysing and reporting on findings from this study as the participants were perhaps not 'representative' in the accepted sense. They were highly-motivated, committed, and self-selecting and over the two years they established a mutually supportive and tightly-knit group. They brought to the programme many years

of experience of working with students from Primary One to secondary Six, and thus already possessed extensive understandings upon which they could draw. As the work of Day (1999, 2004) and Fraser *et al.* (2007) has highlighted, teachers' own values and emotional and intellectual engagement are key to any process of change.

Fraser *et al.* (2007) also foreground the need to provide supportive social contexts that allow enactment and risk-taking; and in their evaluation of the programme, the participants pointed out the value of establishing trusting professional relationships with colleagues and their sense of belonging to a worthwhile joint enterprise. We have described how the CPD programme was informed by socio-cultural approaches to learning, and central to those were collaboration and ongoing discussion and dialogue. Care was taken to activate their prior knowledge and establish what they already knew about what was to be covered in each session. This made it possible for group sessions and individual consultations to be tailored to take account of understandings, misunderstandings and instances where participants had little or no knowledge of topics to be covered. The model of CPD allowed time for deliverers and participants to grapple with challenging concepts and, by allowing them to work collaboratively within their 'Zones of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky 1978), made it possible for genuine learning to occur. Participants were thus experiencing exactly the kind of learning opportunities that it was hoped they would create for their students.

More was at stake, however, than simply providing an engaging, dialogic collaborative experience that fostered professional learning. Key to the programme's design and its evolving activities was the attention given to working to imbricate critical literacy theories into practice. Alexander's definition of pedagogy describes it as:

*the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications. It is what one needs to know, and the skills one*

*needs to command in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decision of which teaching is constituted.* (2008, p. 47; original emphasis)

Consonant with Alexander's definition of pedagogy, the CPD programme that we have described did not view teachers' professional learning in narrow, technicist terms of increasing efficiency and effectiveness, but in terms of expanding their knowledge, horizons and capacities to make well-principled decisions. It helped them to connect theory with practice; and it allowed them time to return to their classrooms, reflect on what they had learned and translate that learning into action and transformational pedagogies (Jones *et al.* 2006). Informed by a 'bottom across' (Coolahan 2002) model of CPD, and consistent with a main thrust of critical literacy itself, the programme was at pains not to position participants as recipients of the 'discourse of educational theories' but as well-informed critics (Sheerer 2000). Attempting to capture a main thrust of this project in a single sentence, it sought to give teachers the intellectual resources and a supportive climate to transform their practice, while positioning them as active critical agents in that development.

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## **Appendix 1 Details of aims and content of days 1 and 2**

### ***Day one***

The aims of day one which were shared with participants were:

- to review and expand participants' understanding of what literacy and critical literacy are;
- to begin to think about a critical literacy project which they might develop in their own schools;
- to consider one model of action research for planning implementing, recording and evaluating this project;
- to provide opportunities for discussion with colleagues;
- to consider the kinds of support available to participants throughout the two-year CPD programme.

Input during the day included:

- definitions of 'literacy', 'critical literacy; and 'reader response theory';
- considering how this philosophy and approach to teaching can: improve the potential and attainment of pupils; fit with other initiatives in Scottish education; be taken forward in participants' own teaching;
- analysing critically an aural news text (Tom Leonard's poem, *The Six O'clock News*), by considering: the composer's purposes; the effect of the speaker's language, dialect, and accent; the tools required for analysis and deconstruction of the text; the audience's stance; definitions of 'text'; genre features; authorial intent; that texts are not timeless, universal, unbiased or fixed; alternative

readings/interpretations; the manipulative power of language; reader response theories – where do I stand in relation to this text, and why?;

- analysing critically a television news report. What are the genre features/markers of television reporting? What are the purposes of television news reporting? Whose voices are absent? How is the audience manipulated? How reliable is television news reporting? Considering bias, manipulation, misinformation. Who is the composer? Is there more than one composer? Whose views are represented here? Whose views are not represented here? Where are the silences? What motivates the interviewee? What motivates the interviewer? Where is the bias – is it explicit? Implicit? Both? Neither? How does this text manipulate the listener/watcher? What are the other ways in which we might ‘read’ this text?;
- Cross-curricular links.

### ***Day two***

The aims of day two were:

- to help participants to devise and implement short teaching programmes using critical literacy strategies;
- to give participants time to share and discuss their thinking in relation to implementing critical literacy;
- to demonstrate the ways in which a Line of Enquiry approach (a Line of Enquiry approach, which can be used with many different areas of the curriculum, organises learning around a series of key questions) can establish critical literacy thinking and teaching.

The day included:

- opportunities for participants to present their outline project plans to small groups;
- whole-group discussion of challenges faced/questions raised;
- university lecturer input: Devising new approaches to critical literacy using a Line of Enquiry approach on the topic of Health and Healthy Eating (a key topic in Curriculum for Excellence): this involved participants in analysing critically poetry, media print images, media adverts and film extracts;
- considering the skills, language(s) and metalanguage(s) required to engage in such analysis.